

## **Essay Assessment**

### **I. Learning Targets**

- a. Candidates will know that essay assessment works well with knowledge & understanding targets and reasoning targets (knowledge).
- b. Candidates will know that essay assessment can only assess the prerequisite knowledge for performance skills and product development targets (knowledge).
- c. Candidates will understand how to develop criteria for scoring essays (concept).
- d. Candidates will be able to correct flawed learning targets, refine them for essay assessment, create effective essay questions, and begin to build scoring guides for essay assessments (skill).
- e. Candidates will value including students in developing essay assessments (disposition).

### **II. Guided Reading**

Essay assessment may be susceptible to teacher bias and subjectivity. However, there are ways to counteract this tendency with clear expectations, focused essay exercises, student involvement, and appropriate scoring methods.

- a. Assessing Knowledge and Understanding (pp.137-138)
  - In many cases, essays are not the most efficient manner to look at student mastery of knowledge. That would generally be selected response. Selected response allows you to ask a greater number of questions and grade those questions faster.
  - Essays are an effective way to assess student understanding of the relationships among ideas. An example essay prompt would be to discuss the different processes involved in the water cycle.
  - Can also be used in an open-book situation to allow the use of reference materials to demonstrate knowledge of connections.
  - Using essays to assess knowledge avoids the compartmentalization that accompanies selected response tests
  - The use of essays here allows learners to see that forming cognitive connections is important.
  - Essays are the wrong approach if the underlying base of knowledge that you wish to draw connections from was presented in an unclear fashion. It is also not the most appropriate means for looking at knowledge that is not connected to other, related topics.
- b. Assessing Reasoning (p.138)
  - Written descriptions of *complex problem solutions* can provide a window into student reasoning

- Use essays for instances when we cannot directly observe knowledge application or see the mental process of reasoning unfold
- Use essays to ask students to analyze, draw inferences, and/or think critically
- As the assessor you MUST:
  - possess a clear and refined vision of each reasoning pattern you are assessing
  - know how to translate your vision into a clear, focused essay exercise
  - present problems to students that are new at the time of the essay assessment, so that students must design a response on the spot

#### c. Assessing Performance Skills (pgs.139 & 140)

- If the learning target relates to a student's ability to demonstrate a specific skill, the only way to evaluate student proficiency is to have the student perform that skill.
  - Some examples of skills we might want to assess are: one's ability to work in a group, speak in a second language, or carry out a science experiment.
- Although you cannot effectively evaluate a student's ability to do these things via an essay, you can evaluate a student's prerequisite knowledge related to the skill you're trying to assess.
  - For example, if we're trying to assess a student's ability to participate in a group, we might ask the student to name 3 basic cooperative skills and explain why they are important within a group context.
  - We can then gauge the student's understanding of the components of cooperative work, by seeing if they named things like: taking turns, addressing group members by name, and eliminating put-downs.
  - We then know whether or not the student is ready to perform the skill.

#### d. Assessing Product Development Capabilities (pp.139-140)

- Essays allow students to demonstrate their mastery of prerequisite knowledge of concepts and processes to create a product. It is important to remember that understanding the process of creation and successful creation are two very different abilities.
- Essays are excellent examples of a product that we can ask students to create for assessment. However, we must keep in mind that the content of what a student writes is different from the way in which the student writes. We can assess both the form (i.e. sentence fluency, organization, grammar) and the content (i.e. expression of ideas, quality reasoning, mastery of content) but we must be clear of our expectations when we assign the essay.
  - This point is especially poignant when it comes to our ELLs. They need to know where the academic focus is for each assignment. They have a lot of academic tasks on their plates and if they are allowed to only focus on the message rather than the form and the message they will relax enough to focus and produce at a higher level.

e. Developing Essay Scoring Procedures (pp.146-150)

- How to ensure student success when using essay assessment:
  - Essay scoring criteria should be formulated in advance.
  - Make sure students are clear on what criteria is used to evaluate the essay assessment: the key to success is the clear articulation of appropriate evaluation criteria.
  - Build up to the assessment with lots of guided practice that hits those targets.
  - Hold yourself and your students accountable for attaining standards.
- Page 147: Scoring options.
- A new scoring guide should be formulated for each new exercise in order to match the criteria of the scoring guide to the learning targets of the exercise
- The Checklist.
  - Points are awarded for specific ingredients of an essay (laid out in a checklist).
  - Example: page 147-148
- Essay Scoring Rubrics:
  - Points are rewarded according to level of mastery in a particular performance criteria.
  - Example: page148
  - The more specific and focused the criteria, the more dependable the results will be.
- Page 149: Guidelines for essay scoring
- Potentials for poor-quality scoring (page 150):
  - Inappropriate criteria: redefine criteria to fit the exercise.
  - Unclear criteria: make expectations explicit.
  - Untrained rater: prepare anyone rating the essay
  - Insufficient time to read and rate: find more raters (or use another method).

f. Developing Essay Assessments (pgs 141-146)

- Begin with clearly articulated learning targets.
- Articulate the knowledge students should have acquired
- Be clear about what kind of reasoning, processing or problem solving skills the students are supposed to write about.
- Write a prompt that points the students a direction that leads them to the answer without providing the answer.
  - Example: Analyze the effectiveness of using the cooperative learning model in your future classroom. In your essay response, think about what we learned about cooperative learning, the theorists behind the approach, and the pros and cons of using the cooperative learning model.
- Page 143 breaks the process down further and provides examples of each step.
- Trying to outline a high-quality response to the prompt is a great way to check that the prompt is assessing the content knowledge and process/reasoning that

are targeted.

g. Student Involvement in Essay Assessment (pp.151-152)

- Students benefit greatly when they have an opportunity to help develop and work with sample essay assessment exercises. It gives them valuable practice and a much clearer understanding of what they must do to hit the learning target. When teachers allow students to become full partners in essay assessment, students are more likely to be highly motivated and to achieve the educational goal.
- Figure 6.6 on Page 151 is a helpful list of ideas for student-involved essay assessment. A few highlights, as described by Stiggins:
  - Develop a blueprint for an essay test before ever teaching a unit, share that plan with students, and keep track of how well instruction is preparing them to succeed on the exam.
  - Give students some test exercises and have them evaluate their quality, given the test blueprint.

### III. Essay Assessment Exemplars

#### Learning Goals:

- Students will understand the ways Fitzgerald and Hurston defined freedom in *The Great Gatsby* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Students will be able to explain reasons for their commonalities and differences based on social and historical considerations.
- Students will be able to use textual evidence to support their claims.

#### Essay Question/Prompt:

How does F. Scott Fitzgerald describe and define freedom in the novel *The Great Gatsby*? How does Zora Neale Hurston depict freedom in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? In an essay, using textual support, consider the commonalities and differences between Fitzgerald's and Hurston's characterization of freedom, provide multiple reasons for their similarities and divergences based on social and historical considerations.